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OaklandTeenZone: Humming its own new tune

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► ANTHONY BERNIER AND NICOLE BRANCH

On January 17, 2009, after years of planning, fundraising, and construction delays, the Oakland Public Library (OPL) finally overcame all obstacles and opened its much-anticipated, newly remodeled TeenZone Department. Planning began in 2001 with the vision that OPL TeenZone would accommodate, educate, and celebrate the city's youth; eight years later this teen space is fulfilling that mission.

Oakland, California, one of the most diverse cities in the nation, sits across the bay from San Francisco and hums to its own tunes. A city of more than 400,000, Oakland teams with populations of Chinese, Vietnamese, African, African American, and diverse Latino communities, both foreign-born and native. Although the area boasts several colleges and the eighth most highly educated citizenry in the United States, high housing costs and urban challenges place many families on the fringe or below the economic middle-class mainstream. Consequently Oakland is also known for its radical political activism; the Black Panther Party, Free Speech, and anti-Vietnam war movements of the 1960s and 1970s all trace their origins to Oakland.



BEFORE



AFTER



THE LIVING ROOM AREA IN THE CENTER OF TEENZONE.

Oakland's unique legacy reverberates through its youth as well. Young people are a force here. Home to the famed Youth Radio, downtown hosts more than a dozen nonprofit youth services agencies. Oakland is also on the cutting edge of educational reform. The small school and charter school movements have already produced thirteen middle and high schools downtown alone. Most of these schools, however, cannot offer young people the full complement of conventional resources. The Oakland Public Library's TeenZone, located in the heart of downtown, now responds to the diverse and vital needs of its urban youth.

Adhering to the idea that young adults add value to space design processes, they have been thick contributors to the Zone from the start. The library's Youth Leadership Council (YLC), heavily involved at every point from the design process through construction, participated in interviews to select and meet regularly with architects; revised many versions of the conceptual plans; led five small design charrette groups in an all-day review process with architects, administrators, Foundation staff, and seventy-six other teens; and contributed to the furniture and technology selections. The commitment to youth leadership and transparency is evident in the YLC's minutes (posted prominently in the Zone) and in photos and movies on the TeenZone Department Web page (<http://www.myspace.com/mainteenzone>).

TEENZONE DESIGN

Tucked up on the second floor of the two-story, 1951 Main Library building adjacent to the picturesque Lake Merritt, the Zone is sited near the highly regarded Oakland history room. The placement is both practical—the space is rather secluded—and symbolic—the close proximity to the history room conjures the community's activist roots and connects youth to them.

Tall exterior windows line the west and south-facing walls, bathing the 2,415-square-foot space in natural light. Although the room is conventionally rectangular, it does not "read" that way anymore; creative design elements consciously break the typical monotony of horizontal and vertical lines with dynamic curvature and varying heights. In opposite corners along the east wall, translucent acrylic partial walls rise like an origami crane's wings to define two small, semiprivate tables and chairs. The in-between space is separated



A STUDY AREA SEPARATED FROM THE MAIN SPACE BY MAGAZINE AND GAME RACKS.

from the main room by chest-high magazine shelves. The Zone's western edge frames additional semi-private seating with skyline views of downtown.

In the center of the room, an oval dropped ceiling showcases stylish lighting to distract from institutional fluorescents. Mirroring the dropped ceiling are two recycled terrazzo computer counters that wrap around structural pillars and a longer computer crescent that offers twelve Apple iMac stations and movable stools. The Zone also accommodates disabled youth with two additional adaptive stations. Defining the center of the Zone, a curved, corrugated metal wall hugs another rounded communal seating area featuring three comfortable couches and a large ottoman. The space achieves flexibility, a sense of movement and choice, and entices a variety of youth activities.

Four dedicated staff members (three full-time Young Adult Specialist librarians and one part-time paraprofessional Library Assistant) freely roam the space un-tethered to a traditional reference desk. Staff offices are adjacent to the Zone. A staff computer, located in the middle of one counter, keeps staff online and constantly in the mix.

The TeenZone is decorated in muted grays and blacks with pops of red, orange, green, and blue throughout. The high-tech color scheme echoes in the sophisticated carpeting, a gray background with orange and blue ovals. The color and design schemes combine youth-friendly aesthetics and evoke varying tastes, styles, and time periods. The Zone's east wall features a gigantic floor-to-ceiling world map. Exaggerated size is one common aspect of youth aesthetics, and the huge map signals how the library can simultaneously launch personal and global imaginations.

In addition to these interior design features, OPL enhances the library user's experience by offering a rotating youth-produced art exhibit along the wall leading to the TeenZone entrance.

SEATING MATTERS

The Zone's commitment to developing a purpose-built and developmentally appropriate YA space is also apparent in design choices that address the teens' anatomical comfort. This goal is achieved primarily through offering a wide variety of seating options: couches, sofa chairs, task chairs, stools, countertops, and even sturdy window ledges. Seating variety allows young adults to rework much of the space's furnishings as they like as well as provides a range of posture positions for the many ways in which youth prefer to sit, stand, and even recline. Likewise, the chalkboard walls in meeting areas, a large whiteboard, and a variety of video

games encourage a range of physical movement and interaction. The wide selection of choices dramatically contrasts conventional and institutional table-and-chair-only options.

COLLECTION

The collection of more than 2,800 printed volumes and 750 media titles is displayed on seven movable shelving units and three wall units. Users borrow materials at the main entrance on the first floor. These measures ensure more flexibility in the Zone and more space for teens, thus avoiding the privileging of library infrastructure and materials over the age-appropriate needs of YA library users.

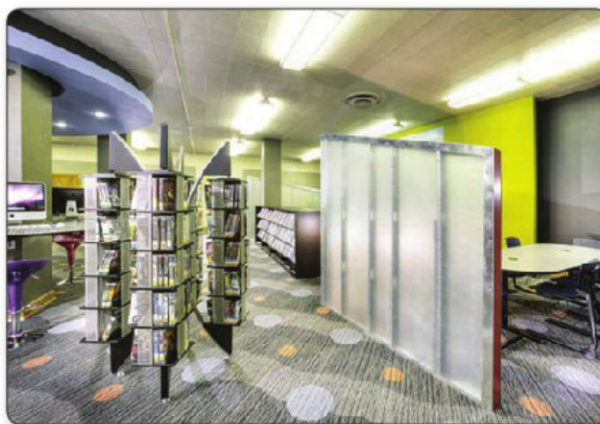
The Zone's collection is geared to meet the recreation and information needs of the city's young people. Thus the space is not a school library by another name but rather a space to explore personal interests, new materials, and information curiosities. As a result, the Zone collection features only the latest graphic novels, manga, fiction, urban fiction, movies, and video games among many other materials.

Similarly the Dewey Decimal System is being phased-out in favor of a more youth-preferred classification system to reflect user-driven prerogatives. The staff finds that this new scheme better meets the information behaviors of local youth. Most items are categorized and shelved by genre and title. The superhero collection is shelved not by author or title but by superhero.

When resource needs exceed the Zone's collection, the staff helps young adults make bibliographic connections with the rest of the Main Library's formidable holdings. Launching from the Zone into the larger library encourages more confident intergenerational mixing in the adult spaces and offers retreat back to the young adult space. Thus youth select for themselves the best dose of intergenerational mixing appropriate for them.

LESSONS LEARNED

The previous OPL "YA space" was little more than six bookshelves. When YA services began a strategic planning process with a new YA Coordinator in 2001, the staff quickly recognized the need for a more professional profile and truly separate space. Although these goals were met, the transition to the redesigned Zone presented several unanticipated challenges. Not long after having developed the new space plan, the library's Foundation disbanded and thus did not contribute anticipated funding support. The project also endured several false starts in securing a contractor.



THE STUDY ROOMS ARE SECTIONED OFF WITH TRANSLUCENT PARTIAL WALLS TO GIVE PRIVACY BUT STILL HAVE AN OPEN, SPACIOUS FEEL.



THE MOVABLE SHELVING UNITS ARE LABELED CLEARLY BY GENRE.

Both of these issues tremendously delayed the project, which in turn affected previous staff and youth relationships. During the extended construction phases, the library's capacity to host class visits, conduct programming, and maintain community connections was considerably limited. Consequently staff must now re-establish relationships and refuel dormant outreach activities. Given the dramatic augmentation of technology, staff must also improve their own connections to technology and the ways youth currently use it.

As more libraries seek improved spatial equity with young adults, unanticipated consequences can present challenging new service questions: How can libraries ensure continuity of service during renovation? And how can libraries anticipate changes in interpersonal dynamics as new resources are introduced. It is easy in a redesign project to become engrossed in the constant demands of planning and construction. But a remodeling project should carefully and realistically re-prioritize departmental service objectives to reflect these circumstances and perhaps even temporarily suspend some aspects of normal operations. Certainly

some additional technical training would seem reasonable for a staff increasing their computer work stations from zero to twelve.

WHAT'S NEXT

Although the TeenZone now represents a powerful advance in youth services, the project did not achieve every aspect of an ideal YA space. Several features did not make the final cut. A self-check machine, which proved too costly, would not only have furnished users with their own convenient check-out path, avoiding the longer lines on the ground floor, but it would also have maximized privacy for borrowing materials on health, sexual identity, and other sensitive subjects. The current project was also completed without backpack storage. Finally, with the Foundation's collapse, the project lost the ability to exploit otherwise superior donor recognition opportunities throughout the space.

Now that the TeenZone is operational, a number of post-occupancy considerations are in order as well. The library should design, collect, analyze, and regularly report data about what will most assuredly cause dramatic usage increases. Another task that should be undertaken within the next year is a user-centered, post-occupancy study similar to the one conducted on a YA space at another OPL branch, which can be found at <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/pla/plapublications/publiclibraries/novdec2006pl.pdf>.

After achieving all of its founding objectives, young adults now fill the Zone—a responsive and purpose-built space designed to meet their needs and preferences. As one young adult shared, "I feel as though the space has now become a room (for us)." They use the computers to find comics, video clips, and curricular materials. They gather in corners, share magazines, and make new friends, all while keeping an eye on little brothers and sisters playing board games. Outside, Oakland's downtown streets continue their unique rhythm. ■

Dr. Anthony Bernier is a full-time faculty member at San Jose State University's School of Library and Information Science, and Project Director of both the first Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Leadership Grant to examine YA space and YouthFacts.org.

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Photos courtesy of Dave Adams Photography. <http://www.daveadamsphotography.com>.

To submit your YA dream space for consideration, request a YA Spaces submission form from Sarah Baltic at toll-free (888) 486-9297 or e-mail sbaltic@scarecrowpress.com.

